

## THE ANGEL AT THE ALTAR (REVELATION 8:3-5): A CASE STUDY ON INTERCALATIONS IN REVELATION

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As has been commonly observed, the book of Revelation is characterized by its artful composition. In writing down his visions, the author made use of several literary techniques. One of these techniques is intercalation (sandwiching), known also as interlude or intermission. In this literary strategy, a literary unit is split into two parts. Between these two parts another unit, different in content, is intercalated or interlocked, functioning parenthetically, thus interrupting the scene description.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for instance, 8:3-5 is sandwiched between vv. 2 and 6; 12:7-12 between vv. 6 and 13; and 15:2-8 between 15:1 and 16:1. In a similar way, chapter 7 is interlocked between the sixth and seventh seals, and 10:1–11:14 between the sixth and seventh trumpets.

A question might be asked regarding the purpose and meaning of these intercalatory passages as intended by the author of the Apocalypse. In endeavoring to find an answer to this question, this article takes Rev 8:3-5 as a case study.

And another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand. And the angel took the censer; and he filled it with the fire of the altar and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake (Rev 8:3-5).<sup>2</sup>

Revelation 8:3-5 serves as an introductory vision to the vision of the blowing of the seven trumpets. The passage is intercalated between 8:2, describing seven angels with seven trumpets standing before God, and 8:6–9:21, portraying the same angels blowing the trumpets. To my knowledge, except for that of G. K. Beale,<sup>3</sup> no serious scholarly endeavor has been made regarding the connection of Rev 8:3-5 with its immediate and broader contexts. The scholarly opinions range from the majority, who view 8:3-5—in connection to 6:9-11—as the key to understanding the vision of the seven trumpets, to the view that the passage is self-contained, having no obvious

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 69-70.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references are from the NASB.

<sup>3</sup>G. K. Beale has offered the most extensive treatment of Rev 8:3-5, seeing it as “a parenthetical transition” between the seals and the trumpets (*The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 460-464).

connections with the context in which it is found.<sup>4</sup> This article presents an endeavor to examine the purpose and meaning of Rev 8:2-6 and its possible connection with the texts between which it is located.

### *The Meaning of the Altar in 8:3a*

The crux of Rev 8:3-5 is ἄλλος ἄγγελος (“another angel”) coming and standing ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (“on/at the altar”). The scholarly consensus holds that the scene takes place in heaven. Since neither the Hebrew Scriptures nor early Jewish literature mention an altar of sacrifice of burnt offering in heaven or sacrificial practices carried out there, the θυσιαστήριον in Rev 8:3 must refer to the altar of incense.<sup>5</sup> However, as David Aune correctly observes, the text under consideration is, together with 9:13, the only passage in Jewish apocalyptic literature where the altar of incense or the incense offering in heaven is mentioned.<sup>6</sup>

Only a few scholars see in the θυσιαστήριον, at which the angel was seen standing in Rev 8:3a the altar of the sacrifice of burnt offering, as distinguished from the “golden altar,” or the altar of incense (8:3b).<sup>7</sup> However, even these scholars unanimously agree that since the scene of Rev 8:2-6 takes place in heaven, the altar under consideration must be, in their view, located in heaven.

A number of recent scholars argue that the θυσιαστήριον in Rev 8:3 combines the aspects of both the altar of incense and the altar of burnt offering in the Israelite temple.<sup>8</sup> This assertion is based on the conclusions reached by R. H. Charles that in Jewish Apocalyptic literature there is only one altar in heaven, namely, the altar of incense upon which “bloodless sacrifices and incense could be offered.”<sup>9</sup> Charles, however, failed to support such a conclusion with evidence from the Jewish Apocalyptic literature. He rather referred to the *Testament of Levi* 3:4-7, which talks about “the uppermost heaven” that is identified as the holy of holies where there “are the archangels, who serve and offer propitiatory sacrifices to the Lord in behalf of all the sins

<sup>4</sup>As argued by David Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 511.

<sup>5</sup>See R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), 1:228; this view is followed by Aune, who translates the θυσιαστήριον in 8:3 as “the altar of incense” (ibid., 511).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. Aune, however, overlooks Rev 5:8, which mentions the twenty-four elders “with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”

<sup>7</sup>The view goes as far back as Wilhelm Bousset (*Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 6th ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1906], 293-294); the view was also held by Isbon T. Beckwith (*The Apocalypse of John*, reprint [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 552-553); George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 125.

<sup>8</sup>This list includes Beale, 454-455, who builds his conclusion on Charles, 1:228.

<sup>9</sup>Charles, 1:228.

of ignorance of the righteous ones. They present to the Lord a pleasing odor, a rational and bloodless oblation."<sup>10</sup>

It appears that the Jewish Apocalyptic sources are not helpful for our understanding of the *θυσιαστήριον* in Rev 8:3. As Aune correctly observes, apart from the book of Revelation, the Jewish Apocalyptic literature knows neither an altar of sacrifice of burnt offering nor the altar of incense in heaven.<sup>11</sup> Nor do the alleged parallels between Rev 8:3-5 and *Testament of Levi* 3:4-7 render conclusive evidence that in writing down his vision John was dependent on this pseudepigraphal text. For instance, while the *Testament of Levi* talks about seven angels of the presence offering propitiatory bloodless sacrifices (no incense offering is explicitly mentioned), in Rev 8:3-5 one angel offers the incense offering upon the golden altar.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the function of the altar of burnt offering in the earthly temple is clearly distinguished from the function of the altar of incense. Any evidence of the two altar aspects combined into one can hardly be supported either by the pre-exilic or the Second Temple practice.

*Θυσιαστήριον* ("altar") is mentioned eight times in Revelation, of which three refer to the altar of incense (8:3b; 8:5; 9:13), four to the altar of sacrifice of burnt offering (6:9; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7), and once in 8:3a, the meaning of which is to be determined in this article. The word *θυσιαστήριον* (from the verb *θυσιάζειν*, "to sacrifice"; Heb. *זֶבֶחַ*) simply means "the place for offering sacrifices." In the LXX, it is used of both the altar of sacrifice of burnt offering and the altar of incense of the earthly temple. The same occurrence of the word is found in the NT.<sup>13</sup> In the earthly temple, the altar of burnt offering stood in the court before the entrance to the sanctuary (Exod 40:29), while the altar of incense was situated inside the sanctuary in front of the curtain separating the holy from the most holy place, "near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony" (Exod 30:6-7; cf. Lev 4:18). Since its function was closely connected with the most holy place, the altar of incense was considered to belong to the most holy place (cf. 1 Kgs 6:22; Heb 9:3-4) and was often referred to as "the altar which is before the Lord" (Lev 4:7, 18; 16:18; 1 Kgs 9:25; Rev 9:13).

Which of the two altars is in view in Rev 8:3a, the altar of burnt offering or the altar of incense? The question to be discussed, first, is regarding the location of the *θυσιαστήριον* in view. As mentioned above, scholars generally hold that the entire scene of 8:3-5 takes place in heaven, and since there is not

<sup>10</sup>James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1983), 1:789.

<sup>11</sup>Aune, 511.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 511-512.

<sup>13</sup>The altar of burnt of offering is mentioned in Matt 5:23-24; 23:10-20, 35; Luke 11:51; Rom 11:3; 1 Cor 9:13; 10:18; Heb 7:13; 13:10; Jas 2:21; Rev 6:9; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7. The altar of incense is found in Luke 1:11; Rev 8:3, 5; 9:13.

an altar of burnt offering in heaven, the θυσιαστήριον in 8:3a must, accordingly, be the altar of incense. Such an understanding is problematic for several reasons. First, the angel “came and stood at the altar” (8:3). The text does not indicate where he came from. In Revelation, whenever an angel(s) “came” (ἦλθεν) to perform a special task, he (they) regularly came from the presence of God, which is expressed with phrases such as “from the rising of the sun” (7:2), “from heaven” (10:1; 18:1; 20:1), and “out of the temple [in heaven]” (14:15, 17, 18; 15:6). Three times the text simply states that the angel “came,” without indicating where from (8:3; 17:1; 21:9). In each case, however, the context indicates that the angel came from the very presence of God. Thus one might conclude beyond any reasonable doubt that the “another angel” of 8:3 also comes from the very presence of God. If such an understanding is correct, then the first altar by which he was seen standing cannot be the altar of incense for the simple reason that that altar was located “before the Lord” in the heavenly sanctuary. This would make the word “came” problematic and superfluous due to the fact that, in this view, the angel was already in the presence of the Lord.

Second, 8:3 states that the angel came (from the presence of the Lord) and stood ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (“on the altar”) with a golden censer. Then, at this altar, the angel was given the incense in order to offer it with the prayers of the saints ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον τὸ χρυσοῦν τὸ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου (“on the golden altar which is before the throne”).

The scholarly consensus holds that the phrase “stood ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου” denotes the angel seen standing “at” or “by” the altar (of incense). Basically, the preposition ἐπὶ denotes a position “on” or “upon” something that forms a support or foundation, and, as such, is the opposite of ὑπὸ (under).<sup>14</sup> In its association with the genitive, it most frequently means “on” or “upon,” answering the question “where.”<sup>15</sup> The usage of the preposition ἐπὶ with a noun in the spatial genitive in Revelation consistently denotes someone or something “on” something, rather than “at” or “by” something.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Murray J. Harris, “epi,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. C. Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-1985), 3:1193.

<sup>15</sup>F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 122.

<sup>16</sup>The construction ἐπὶ + the genitive case occurs about 57 times in Revelation: ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (“upon the earth,” 3:10; 5:3, 10, 13; 6:10; 7:1; 8:13; 10:2, 5, 8; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 14:6; 16:18; 17:8; 18:24); ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου (“on the throne,” Rev 4:10; 5:1, 7; 6:16; 7:15); ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης (“on the sea,” Rev 5:13; 7:1; 10:2, 5, 8); ἐπὶ τῶν μετώπων (“upon the foreheads,” 7:3; 9:4; 13:16; 14:1, 9; 22:4); ἐπὶ τῆς δεξιᾶς (“on the right hand,” 1:20); τοὺς καθημένους ἐπ’ αὐτῶν (“the ones sitting on them [horses],” 9:17; 19:18, 19, 21); ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς (“on the head,” 10:1; 12:1; 14:14); ἐπὶ τῆς πλατείας (“on the street,” 11:8); ἐπὶ τῶν κεράτων (“on the horns,” 13:1); ἐπὶ τῆς χειρὸς (“on the hand,” 13:16; 14:9); ἐπὶ τῆς νεφέλης ([sitting] “on the cloud,” 14:15, 16); τῆς καθημένης ἐπὶ ὕδατων πολλῶν (“sitting on many waters,” 17:1); κάθηται ἐπ’ αὐτῶν (“sits on them

In the LXX, ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (in the spatial genitive case) regularly denotes the sacrificial offering on, or being offered on, the altar of burnt offering (Exod 29:38; Lev 1:8, 12; 3:5; 7:31; 8:30; 9:24; 1 Chron 16:40; Ezra 7:17; Isa 56:7).<sup>17</sup> With reference to persons, the same phrase—ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου—is used to denote somebody standing on the altar of burnt offering (1 Kgs 18:26; Amos 9:1).<sup>18</sup> The same meaning is expressed with ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον (in the spatial accusative; cf. 1 Kgs 13:1; 2 Kgs 23:16-17).<sup>19</sup> Someone (Lev 10:12) or something (Deut 16:21) “at” or “by” the altar of incense in the LXX is expressed by παρὰ τὸ θυσιαστήριον.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου<sup>21</sup> (where θυσιαστήριον refers to the altar of burnt offering) with reference to persons denotes someone standing “on” the altar of burnt offering.

The foregoing arguments lead to the conclusion that the use of the preposition ἐπὶ in Rev 8:3 could be deliberate due to the fact that in the Jerusalem temple, the altar of burnt offering had large dimensions. According to the *Middoth* tractate of the *Mishnah*, the size of the altar at its base was thirty-two by thirty-two by one cubit at the base, while the altar proper was thirty by thirty by five cubits.<sup>22</sup> It thinned toward the top in several steps, measuring at the top level twenty-four by twenty-four cubits.<sup>23</sup> One cubit on every side of the top level was the place where the priest stood offering the sacrifice. Since

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[mountains]”, 17:9); ἐπ’ αὐτῶν (“on them [foundations],” 21:14); “across” (21:16). It is also sometimes used metaphorically, denoting “over” with regard to “authority” or “control” (Rev 2:26; 9:11; 10:6; 14:18; 17:18; 20:6) or to do something to someone (3:10).

<sup>17</sup>It is used also in reference to something (e.g., a cover) on the altar of incense (Num 4:11, 13). The same meaning is expressed with ἐπ’ + θυσιαστηρίου (in the accusative case; cf., “upon the altar of burnt offering,” Lev 1-9); “upon the altar of incense,” Deut 33:10; 1 Chron 6:34 ). Frequently, the two combinations are used interchangeably (cf. Lev 1-9 ).

<sup>18</sup>Some other usages are ἀπέναντι τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (“before the altar,” Lev 6:7; Num 7:10; Deut 26:4); ἐνώπιον τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (2 Kgs 18:19); κατὰ πρόσωπον τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (“in front of the altar,” 1 Kgs 3:15; 8:22, 31, 54; 1 Macc 7:36).

<sup>19</sup>Cf. εἰσθήκει ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον τοῦ ἐπιθῆσαι (“he stood on the altar of sacrifice,” 1 Kgs 13:1); εἶδεν ὁ βασιλεὺς τὸ θυσιαστήριον καὶ ἀνέβη ἐπ’ αὐτὸ (“the king saw the altar and went upon it,” 2 Kgs 16:12).

<sup>20</sup>However, to approach the altar of burnt offering (1 Kgs 12:32-33) or the altar of incense (Lev 16:18; 1 Sam 2:28) is expressed with ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον.

<sup>21</sup>Some manuscript variants have the reading ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον (ἐπὶ + τὸ θυσιαστήριον in a spatial accusative); see Aune, 483.

<sup>22</sup>*Mishnah Middoth* 3.1 (Herbert Danby, ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1933], 593). The measurement given by Josephus of the same altar is 50 x 50 x 15 cubits (*J.W.* 5.5.6).

<sup>23</sup>*Mishnah Middoth* 3.1; according to Josephus, a ramp ran to the top level of the altar (*J.W.* 5.5.6); cf. Exod 20:26.

the author of the Apocalypse obviously drew the altar imagery from the Jerusalem temple, the angel he saw standing ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου meant “on the altar,” presumably of burnt offering.

This seems to suggest that two different altars are in view in Rev 8:3-5: “the altar” (8:3a) on which the angel was said to have stood, and “the golden altar which is before the throne” (8:3b-5). That the second θυσιαστήριον is referred to as “the golden altar” (τὸ θυσιαστήριον τὸ χρυσοῦς) “before the throne” (ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου) could be because the author wanted to distinguish it from the first altar, which is referred to as “the altar,” without qualification. “The golden altar” (Heb. אֲזִיזָה אֲזִיזָה) of the earthly sanctuary/temple was the altar of incense,<sup>24</sup> while the altar of burnt offering was known as “the bronze altar” (τὸ θυσιαστήριον τὸ χαλκοῦν).<sup>25</sup> The descriptive phrase “before the throne” parallels the phrase “before God” in 8:4 (cf. 9:13), thus denoting the altar of incense that was before the Lord (Lev 4:7, 18; 16:18; 1 Kgs 9:25), namely, “near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony” (Exod 30:6-7). The throne in 8:3 refers to the ark of the covenant because, in the earthly sanctuary, the ark functioned as the throne of YHWH.<sup>26</sup> In the ancient Jewish temple practice, the priest(s) selected to offer the incense on the golden altar took the censer with the incense and coals from the altar of burnt sacrifice and brought it into the temple to offer it on the altar of incense.<sup>27</sup> In Rev 8:3, it seems that it was at the altar of sacrifice that the angel was seen as standing, and from there he took the censer with incense to offer in the holy place of the heavenly temple.

John the Revelator did not find it necessary to identify the first altar in 8:3, but rather the second one (τὸ θυσιαστήριον τὸ χρυσοῦν). The first one he refers to simply as τὸ θυσιαστήριον (“the altar”) without qualification. The reason for that could be that he had in mind the altar previously mentioned in the book, namely, the one in the scene of the fifth seal (6:9-11), beneath which the slain martyrs prayed to God for vindication: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you not judge and avenge our blood upon those who dwell on the earth”? (my translation). The angel in 8:3 seems to be standing at the same θυσιαστήριον under which the blood of the slain martyrs, which had been poured out, was crying for vindication. The imagery of the slain martyrs underneath the altar, whose blood was poured out, is drawn from the Hebrew Bible sacrificial ritual. As such, it must be understood symbolically. The altar of burnt offering in the court of the earthly sanctuary was the place where the

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Exod 39:38; 40:5, 26; Num 4:11; 1 Kgs 7:48; 2 Chron 4:19; Rev 9:13.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Exod 38:30; 39:39; 2 Kgs 16:14-15; 2 Chron 1:5-6; 7:7; Ezek 9:2.

<sup>26</sup>Aune, 512.

<sup>27</sup>See *Mishnah Tamid* 4.2-5 (*The Mishnah*, ed. Herbert Danby [London: Oxford University Press, 1974], 585); Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, trans. T. A. Burkill et al, rev. and ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black (Edinburgh: T. & T Clark, 1979), 2:305-306.

bloody sacrifices were offered. The most sacred part of the sacrifice was the blood, a symbol of life. Because life belonged to God (Lev 17:11-14), the blood of the slain animal was drained and poured out at the base of the altar (Exod 29:12; Lev 4:7, 30-34; 8:15; 9:9).<sup>28</sup> Thus, in a symbolic presentation drawn from the Hebrew Bible, John portrays God's faithful people in terms of sacrificed saints with their blood poured out as an offering to God. Later, in Rev 16:6-7, he uses the phrase "poured out" with reference to the blood of the saints and prophets that was poured out, most likely, beneath the altar (as v. 7 indicates).

The idea of martyrdom as a figurative sacrificial offering to God is well known in the NT.<sup>29</sup> Jesus told his disciples that the day would come when those who would kill them would think that they were offering service to God (John 16:2). Paul applies this imagery to the death of Jesus when stating that Jesus gave himself up for us as "an offering and sacrifice to God for a fragrant aroma" (Eph 5:2). He also describes the suffering that Christians must undergo in terms of "sheep to be slaughtered" (Rom 8:36), and speaks of himself as "being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith" (Phil 2:17). Anticipating his soon-coming martyrdom, he makes the figurative statement: "For I am already poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come" (2 Tim 4:6). In the same way, the scene of the fifth seal describes the death of the saints under the altar as a sacrificial offering to God: they were slain because of their faithfulness to "the word of God" and "the testimony which they had maintained" (6:9).

The figurative presentation of the souls of the slain martyrs seen "underneath the altar" (ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου)—not upon it—indicates that the θυσιαστήριον in Rev 6:9 is the altar of burnt sacrifices. Here the revelator uses the language from Lev 17:11, which identifies the soul of the sacrifice with the sacrificial blood. The "souls" of the slain saints underneath the altar cry to God to avenge their *blood*. This suggests that the "souls" of the saints is a synonym for the "blood" of the saints poured at the base of the altar as a sacrifice,<sup>30</sup> which is crying for vindication regarding their death just as Abel's blood cried out to God because of his death (Gen 4:10). In later Jewish tradition, the souls of the righteous are to be preserved under the throne of

<sup>28</sup>Cf. *Mishnah Tamid* 4.1 (Danby, 585).

<sup>29</sup>In addition, Paul sometimes describes the entire Christian life as offering sacrifice to God (cf. Rom 12:1; Heb 13:15-16; 1 Pet 2:5). In Phil 4:18, he describes the financial support for his ministry made by the Christians in Philippi as "a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God."

<sup>30</sup>Contrary to Beale, 391-392, who struggles with the fact that in the text the slain saints are seen "under the altar" (ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου), rather than upon it. He thinks that it is because of the "blood running down to the base of the altar after having been poured on its top." However, he clearly overlooks the fact that in the earthly temple blood was never poured out under the altar of incense; it was rather sprinkled on it or the horns of the altar was smeared with blood by the top of the finger (cf. Lev 4:6-7, 17-18, 16:18-19), which rules out any idea of "blood running down to the base of the altar."

God.<sup>31</sup> This rules out any identification of the θυσιαστήριον in Rev 6:9 as the altar of incense for the simple reason that the blood of sacrificial animals was never poured out under the altar of incense; it was, rather, sprinkled on it.<sup>32</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the altar of burnt sacrifice in the earthly temple did not stand in the temple, but rather in the outer court. In biblical typology, the outer court stands for the earth (cf. Heb 10:5-12; Rev 11:1-2). John the Revelator likewise refers to the earth in terms of the court of the earthly temple located outside the temple (11:2), with the altar of burnt offering on it. This locates the altar in 6:9 together with the entire scene of the fifth seal on earth, rather than in the temple in heaven. Since the evidence strongly suggests that the altar in 8:3a, at which the angel with the golden censer stood, is the same altar under which the souls of the slain saints cry to God for vindication and justice (6:9-11), the altar in 8:3a must be placed on earth rather than in heaven.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Background of the Scene of 8:3-5*

It thus appears that the clue to the full theological meaning of Rev 8:3-5 lies in the scene of the fifth seal in which the slain martyrs at the base of the altar of burnt offering are praying to God for vindication and judgment on their enemies (6:9-11). Thus the scene of 8:3-5 builds on the preceding scene of 6:9-11. The entire scenario seems to be built on the daily sacrifice known as the *tamid* in the ancient Hebrew cultic system, as described in the *Tamid* tractate of the *Mishnah*.<sup>34</sup> In the *tamid* evening service, after the sacrificial lamb had been placed upon the altar of burnt offering, the blood was poured out at the base of the altar. At the altar of burnt offering, the assigned priest would have taken the golden censer filled with incense<sup>35</sup> (while another priest took coals of fire from the altar). Next, he took the incense inside the temple and offered it upon the golden altar of incense in the holy place.<sup>36</sup> After offering the incense, he came out to bless the people, who were waiting in the court. At that moment, two priests blew their trumpets, marking the end of the daily sacrificial ceremony.

It appears that the first-century readers of Revelation, who had first- and

<sup>31</sup>As pointed out by Charles, 1:229; cf. Babylonian Talmud *Shabbath* 152b (I. Epstein, ed. [London: Soncino, 1936]).

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Lev 4:6-7, 17-18; 16:18-19; the blood of the sacrifice was rather poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering (cf. Lev 4:7, 18, 25; 30:34; 8:15; 9:9).

<sup>33</sup>Beale, 455, and Robert H. Mounce (*The Book of Revelation*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 157) argue that the θυσιαστήριον in 8:3 combines aspects of both the altar of burnt offering and of the altar of incense of the earthly temple.

<sup>34</sup>*Mishnah Tamid* 4.1-5.6 (Danby, 585-587); see also Schürer, 2:299-308.

<sup>35</sup>The golden censer (λιβανωτός χρυσοῦς) was a "firepan" (θύσση χρυσοῦς) in the Solomon temple (cf. 1 Kgs 7:50; 2 Chron 4:22; Jer 52:18-19), as well as in the Second Temple (see *Mishnah Yoma* 5 [Danby, 167]).

<sup>36</sup>In the evening service of the *tamid*, the incense was offered after the sacrifice, while in the morning service it was offered before the sacrifice (see Schürer, 2:307).

second-hand knowledge of the Hebrew cultic ritual, could see strong parallels between the scene of 8:3-5 and the *tamid* evening service. In light of what they knew, they would have read the scene under consideration in the following way: the angel first comes to the altar of burnt offering—under which the blood of the slain saints, which had been poured out, was crying for vindication—where he fills the golden censer with incense and takes coals of fire from the altar (Lev 16:12). Incense in the Bible is associated with the prayers of the faithful (cf. Ps 141:2; Rev 5:8). David prayed: “May my prayer be counted as incense before You” (Ps 141:2). It also brings to mind the scene of Zachariah ministering the incense offering, while the people were in prayer in the court of the temple (Luke 1:9-10). According to Rev 5:8, incense represents the prayers of the saints. The incense offered on the altar in Rev 8:3 is associated with the prayers for justice and judgment of the slain saints under the altar of burnt offering in the scene of the fifth seal (6:9-11). The angel takes the incense and the coals into the holy place of the temple in heaven and administers the incense on the golden altar before the throne<sup>37</sup> (cf. Lev 16:12b-13). The prayers of the saints, in the manner of the smoke of the incense, go directly before God (8:4).<sup>38</sup> They are heard and accepted by God. God is already in the process of vindicating them.<sup>39</sup> In direct response to the saints’ prayers, God sends his judgment on the earth: the angel fills the censer with the fire from the golden altar and hurls it down to the earth. This is followed by thunder, voices, flashes of lightning and an earthquake, the cosmic phenomena denoting theophany (cf. Exod 19:16-19; Isa 19:6; Rev 11:19; 16:18).

The scene remarkably resembles the scene portrayed in the *Mishnah*, stating that during the *tamid* ritual, when the priests officiating in the holy place reached the place between the porch and the altar of incense, one of them took the shovel and threw it down. The noise of the shovel was so loud that no one in Jerusalem could hear the voice of his neighbor.<sup>40</sup> According to the same tractate, the sound of the shovel could be heard as far as Jericho.<sup>41</sup> This is further indication that the entire scene in 8:3-5 mirrors the Second Temple *tamid* services.

In a similar scene in Ezekiel’s vision, the man clothed in linen took coals of

<sup>37</sup>According to *Mishnah Yoma* 5.1 (Danby, 167), when the priest entered the holy place and “reached the Ark he put the fire-pan between the two bars. He heaped up the incense on the coals and the whole place became filled with smoke.”

<sup>38</sup>Grant R. Osborne observes, interestingly, the relationship between the “smoke” of the prayers of the saints here, and the “smoke” of the torment of the evildoers rising forever and ever (14:11; 19:3): “In the theology of the book, the smoke of the latter is God’s response to the smoke of the former” (*Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 345).

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>40</sup>*Mishnah Tamid* 5.6 (Danby, 587). The word “shovel” is *magrefah*, an instrument made in the shape of a shovel, having ten pipes with ten holes in each pipe; as such, it could produce many different sounds (see *ibid.*, 585, n.1).

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.8 (Danby, 585).

fire from between the cherubim and scattered them over Jerusalem as a token of divine judgment because of the abominations committed in the city (Ezek 10:1-7). The throwing of fire down on the earth is a judgment action.<sup>42</sup> The action of the angel here brings to mind the statement of Jesus: "I have come to cast fire upon the earth" (Luke 12:49). It is especially significant that in Rev 8:5 the judgments of God are sent on the earth from the very same altar from which the prayers of the saints were offered to God. Similarly, the censer used for offering incense has now become the source of judgment, hurled on the earth in response to the prayers of the slain saints under the altar. This symbolic scene was intended to show that it was in response to the prayers of God's oppressed people that God's judgments, portrayed in the symbolic presentation of the seven-trumpet plagues, were sent on the earth and its inhabitants. Its purpose was to provide God's faithful people with a firm assurance that they are not forgotten by God and that their prayers have been heard and will be answered.

The offering of the incense on the golden altar and the hurling of the fire on the earth served as a signal to the seven angels to blow, one after another, their trumpets and herald the plagues being sent on the earth and its inhabitants. This is another indication that the trumpet judgments are affected by the prayers of the slain saints in the scene of the fifth seal: "How long, O Lord, will you not judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (6:9-10). Now God responds to these prayers by sending the trumpet plagues, thus judging "those who dwell on the earth" (8:13).

This entire scene brings to mind the words of God to Moses: "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry" (Exod 3:7). Just as with the Egyptian plagues, so the trumpet woes are depicted as judgments against the enemies of God's people, comprising steps toward their deliverance.<sup>43</sup> The obvious parallels between the two—i.e., the trumpet series and the plagues of Egypt (Exod 7:11)—suggest that the latter are, for the most part, the main source from which John drew the descriptions of the seven trumpet plagues. However, any further discussion regarding this topic is beyond the scope of this study.

#### *Revelation 8:3-5 within Its Literary and Thematic Contexts*

It appears that Rev 8:3-5 acts as the springboard text, both concluding the seven-seals series and introducing the seven-trumpet-plague series. As a particular literary technique of Revelation,<sup>44</sup> the springboard passage provides

<sup>42</sup>E.g., Luke 18:28-29; Rev 8:7-9; cf. Isa 66:15-16; Ezek 39:6; Amos 1:4-2:5; Mal 4:1.

<sup>43</sup>Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 13.

<sup>44</sup>Springboard passages function both as the concluding statement of the preceding section and the introduction to what follows. They seem to conclude and introduce almost all major sections of Revelation: e.g., the concluding statement of Rev 1:20 of the

the key to the meaning of the major sections of the book, suggesting the author's own intention regarding the understanding of the text. It enables the interpreter to find the interpretation that is imbedded in the broader context of the book, rather than to search outside the book for a creative interpretation.<sup>45</sup> Serving as "a parenthetical transition"<sup>46</sup> from the seals to the trumpet plagues, Rev 8:3-5 picks up and continues the theme introduced in the scene of the fifth seal (6:9-11) and inaugurates it into the vision of the seven trumpets, thus making the trumpets a divine response to the saints' prayers.<sup>47</sup> The following section explores the theological meaning of the two visions in light of their Hebrew Bible backgrounds.

The scene of the opening of the seven seals echoes the Hebrew Bible covenantal curses concept.<sup>48</sup> The covenant curses in the Hebrew Bible are the penalties sent by God on Israel because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant. The covenant curses are referred to in terms of "war, famine, pestilence and wild beasts" (Lev 26:21-26; Deut 32:23-25). These "four severe judgments" (Ezek 14:21) or "four kinds of doom" (Jer 15:3) were intended to wake the people and their leaders from their apostate condition and bring them back to God. By the seventh/sixth century B.C., they became well-known technical terms used by the prophets for the covenant "woes," which, in turn, were used by God to punish apostasy and lead the people to repentance.<sup>49</sup> Aune observes how the language of the covenant curses was used by Dio Cassius in reporting the casualties the Jews suffered during the Bar-Kokba revolt (132-135 A.D.).<sup>50</sup>

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vision of the glorified Christ (1:9-20) functions simultaneously as the introduction to the seven messages to the churches (chaps. 2-3). Rev 3:21, as the summary statement of the messages to the seven churches (chaps. 2-3), functions as the introductory text for Rev 4-7. The vision of the sealed one hundred and forty-four thousand (chap. 7) elaborates and explains the concluding statement of Rev 6:16-17 in the form of a question regarding who will stand before the great wrath of the Lamb. Rev 12:17, as the concluding statement of chap. 12, is developed in chaps 13-14. Rev 15:2-4 serves both as the conclusion of Rev 12-14 and the introduction to the seven last plagues. Some springboard texts seem to provide the clue for the larger portions of the book (e.g., 11:18 seems to outline the entire second half of the book [12-22:5]).

<sup>45</sup>For further research on this topic, see Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2002), 26-27, 160-161.

<sup>46</sup>Beale, 454.

<sup>47</sup>See Pierre Prigent, *Apocalypse as Liturgie* (Neuchatel: Delachaux et Niestle, 1964), 135; Beale 462-463.

<sup>48</sup>For the following ideas I am indebted to Jon Paulien ("The Seven Seals," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 6 [Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992], 222-224). See also Stefanovic, 214-219.

<sup>49</sup>See, e.g., Jer 14:12-13; 15:2-3; 21:6-9; 24:10; 29:17-18; Ezek 5:12-17; 6:11-12; 14:12-23; 33:27-29.

<sup>50</sup>See Aune, 402, who cites Dio Cassius: "Five hundred and eighty thousand men

In implementing the covenant curses, God used enemy nations, such as the Philistines, Moabites, Assyrians, and Babylonians, as instruments of his judgment (cf. Judg 2:13-14; Ps 106:40; Isa 10:5-6).<sup>51</sup> The enemy nation would come and afflict the Israelites by plundering and destroying them. In most cases, these nations, while sent by God as the executor of judgment, overplayed their part and tried to destroy God's people. In their hopeless situation, the people of Israel would turn to God for deliverance. At this point, God responded to the prayers of his afflicted people and reversed the judgments on the enemy nation(s) in order to provide deliverance for his people (cf. Deut 32:41-43). Thus, for instance, Jeremiah spoke on behalf of YHWH: "I will repay Babylon, and all the inhabitants of Chaldea for all their evil that they have done in Zion before your eyes," declares the Lord" (Jer 51:24). Joel prophesied that YHWH would judge and punish all nations for what they have done to his people (Joel 3:2-7).<sup>52</sup> The text in Zechariah reflects strong parallels with Rev 6, where a question is raised by an angel: "O Lord of hosts, how long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which You have been indignant these seventy years?" The prophet is said to proclaim: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster'" (1:12-15).

The striking parallels between the language of the first four seals of Rev 6:1-8 and the covenant curses texts, together with Zech 1:12-15, strongly suggest that John had the Hebrew Bible covenantal curses motif in mind while writing down the scene of the breaking of the seven seals. This Hebrew Bible background clearly defines the context of the seals: the situation of the church in the hostile world. The opening of the first four seals describes in a symbolic presentation the judgments of God on the church unfaithful to the gospel (6:1-8). The scene of the fifth seal portrays the slain faithful at the base of the altar of burnt offering, crying to God for intervention and judgment on their oppressors and enemies: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you not judge and avenge our blood upon those who dwell on the earth?" (my translation). The plea of the slain saints does not sound like a request for revenge on their

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were slain in the various raids and battles [i.e., by the *sword*], and the number of those that perished by *famine, disease* and fire was past finding out. Thus nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate, a result of which the people had had forewarning before the war . . . and many *wolves and hyenas* rushed howling into their cities" (*Historiae Romanae* 69.1.2; emphasis and the bracketed phrase supplied by Aune).

<sup>51</sup>This idea might be best observed in Judges when the situation in Israel is described in the following terms: the Israelites did evil in the sight of YHWH; YHWH sends an enemy nation, who oppresses them; the people turn to YHWH crying for deliverance; YHWH provides the deliverance for them (cf. 2:11-16; 3:7-9, 12-15; 4:1ff.; 6:1-14; 10:6ff.; 13:11ff.).

<sup>52</sup>Similar texts are found throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Jer 50:17-20; 33-34; Joel 3:19-20; Zech 14:3-21).

oppressors and enemies. The Greek word ἐκδικέω (“avenge”) means literally “procure justice for someone,”<sup>53</sup> implying a legal action. The legal usage of the word is best expressed in Luke 18:3-5, where the widow in Jesus’ parable makes a plea to the judge: “Give justice/legal protection [ἐκδίκησόν] to me against my opponent!” The judge responds: “Because this widow bothers me, I will give her justice/legal protection [ἐκδικήσω].” The legal aspect of the word is clearly seen in Rev 19:2, where God has judged Babylon by avenging [ἐξεδίκησεν] on her the blood of his servants. Thus the plea of the slain saints under the altar “must be seen as a legal plea in which God is asked to conduct a legal process leading to a verdict that will vindicate his martyred saints.”<sup>54</sup>

The slain saints are urged not to active resistance, but to patient endurance (6:9-10). The following scene of the sixth seal was seemingly intended to answer in part the petition of the saints: the day is coming when God will ultimately judge the oppressors and enemies of his people. The subsequent chapter 7—which functions as an interlude providing the answer to the question raised in 6:17—and the breaking of the seventh seal, conclude the seven-seals series. What follows is the vision of the seven-trumpet plagues introduced by the intercalation in view (8:3-5). As the springboard passage, 8:3-5 continues the theme of 6:9-11, providing the suffering faithful a strong assurance that their prayers for vindication are not forgotten because God is speedily coming in judgment against those who assault them.<sup>55</sup> This theme is further developed in the following vision of the trumpet plagues, which thus function as heaven’s speedy response to the prayers of God’s afflicted people.

Next, it is necessary to consider the theological meaning of the trumpets. In the Bible, the blowing of the trumpet is the symbol of “the intervention of God in history.”<sup>56</sup> The life of ancient Israel was closely connected to the blowing of trumpets.<sup>57</sup> Their theological meaning is defined in Num 10:8-10:

<sup>53</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. “ἐκδικέω.”

<sup>54</sup>Joel Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 17 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1993), 232.

<sup>55</sup>Alan Johnson, “Revelation,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 12:489.

<sup>56</sup>William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 2d ed., Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 2:42.

<sup>57</sup>In the Hebrew Bible, trumpets were used for different purposes: in most cases, they were used in the context of the temple liturgy and holy wars (Lev 25:9; Num 10:9-10; Josh 6:4-20). But, a sounding trumpet could be, for instance, the summons to battle (Judg 3:27; 6:34; Jer 51:27), to announce the coronation of an Israelite king (2 Sam 15:10; 1 Kgs 1:34, 39; 2 Kgs 9:13; 11:14), for gathering the people (Num 10:2-7; 1 Sam 13:3-4; Neh 4:20; Joel 2:15-16), or as a warning of approaching danger (Jer 4:5, 19-21; 6:1-17; Ezek 33:3-6; Amos 3:6).

The priestly sons of Aaron, moreover, shall blow the trumpets; and this shall be for you a perpetual statute throughout your generations. And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who attacks you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the Lord your God, and be saved from your enemies. Also in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first days of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the Lord your God.

As the text indicates, the purpose of blowing the trumpets was to cause God to “remember” his people; in other words, it provided Israel with the assurance that God remembered them when their adversaries attacked them and viciously harassed them, and that he would deliver them. In practice, it looked as follows: whether seeking forgiveness from sins in the sanctuary or fighting against enemies, the priests blew the trumpets. God then responded by remembering them, namely, forgiving the people’s sins and delivering them from their adversaries. This concept is best illustrated in 2 Chron 13:14-15:

When Judah turned around, behold they were attacked both front and rear; so they cried to the Lord, and the priests blew the trumpets. Then the men of Judah raised a war cry, and when the men of Judah raised the war cry, then it was that God routed Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.

Trumpet blasts in the Hebrew Bible designate the appearance of God in relation to the most important events in Israel’s history.<sup>58</sup> This concept passed into the NT, where trumpets are associated with the end-time appearance and intervention of God (cf. Matt 24:31; 1 Cor 15:51-53; 1 Thess 4:16-17). Revelation 8–9 should be best understood against these Hebrew Bible and NT backgrounds. The blowing of the seven trumpets must be regarded as a series of interventions by God in history in response to the prayers of his afflicted people in the scene of the opening of the fifth seal: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you not judge and avenge our blood *on those who dwell on the earth?*” (6:10; emphasis supplied). The purpose of Rev 8:2-5 is to show that their prayers were heard by God. In responding to the prayers of the saints, the angel takes the golden censer (by which the incense mingled with the prayers of the saints was offered on the golden altar) and fills it with fire from the altar; then he throws it on the earth, and there follow “thunders and voices and lightning and an earthquake” (Rev 8:5). This theophanic manifestation in Revelation might be associated with the judgment (cf. 16:18).<sup>59</sup> It is then that one after another the seven angels blow their trumpets; in such a way, God comes to remember his people; his wrath kindles in judgments on those who have been oppressing them. Revelation 8:13 states

<sup>58</sup>E.g., at Sinai, the Israelites saw the thunder and the lightning flashes, the thick cloud on the mountain, and heard “a very loud trumpet sound” (Exod 19:16; 20:18); a loud trumpet blast caused the destruction of Jericho (Jos 6:4-16); the trumpet sound is an integral part of the Hebrew Bible Day of the Lord concept (Isa 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph 1:16; 9:14).

<sup>59</sup>This theophanic-manifestation phenomenon is referred to in a variety of contexts (e.g., Exod 19:16-19; Rev 4:5; 11:19).

clearly that the trumpets are for “those who dwell on the earth,” which links the trumpet judgments to the prayers of the saints in Rev 6:10. The focus-objects of both texts are clearly “those who dwell on the earth.”

The foregoing discussion strongly suggests that the seven trumpets are heaven’s response to the prayers of God’s people for deliverance from their oppressors. While the scene of the sixth seal provides the saints with an assurance that the day is coming when God’s ultimate judgments will visit their adversaries, the vision of the seven trumpet plagues gives an even more direct message: God is already judging the enemies of his faithful people. This makes the trumpet plagues preliminary judgments and the foretaste of the ultimate and final judgments to fall on the wicked as portrayed in Rev 15–16. The trumpet plagues are seen as mixed with mercy; the bowl plagues are expressed as the fullness of God’s wrath unmixed with mercy (15:1). At their execution, the pronouncement is made: “Righteous are You, who are and who were, O Holy One, because you judged these things; for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them the blood to drink. They deserve it.’ And I heard *the altar* saying, ‘Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are your judgments” (16:5-7; emphasis supplied). The altar here acknowledging God’s judgments on the enemies of God’s people must be the one from the scene of the fifth seal under which the slain saints were making their plea to God for deliverance (6:9). The justice is executed; the enemies of God’s people have received their just judgment.

This is confirmed later in the book and recognized by the redeemed saints themselves: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; because His judgements are true and righteous; for . . . He has avenged the blood of his bond-servants on her” (19:1-2). The expression “He has avenged the blood of his bond-servants” links the passage in view here with 6:9-11. As indicated before, the petition of the slain saints under the altar was for a legal action. Now, God has judged Babylon (cf. 18:20) and given justice (ἐξεδίκησεν) as the ultimate answer to the petition of the saints. The judgment is referred to in terms of the “smoke” that “rises up forever and ever” (19:3). This smoke of torment that the evildoers experience stands here in a direct contrast to the smoke of incense ascending to God with the prayers for vindication of the faithful saints in 8:2-3. It appears that “the smoke of the latter is God’s response to the smoke of the former.”<sup>60</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that the slain saints are seen at the center of this rejoicing multitude before God’s throne.<sup>61</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This study leads to the conclusion that the parenthetical passage of Rev 8:3-5 functions as a connecting link, both concluding the seven-seals series and

<sup>60</sup>I am indebted to Osborne, 345, for this insight.

<sup>61</sup>As rightly observed by Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation*, ACNT (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 306; and Beale, 916.

introducing the seven-trumpet series. As such, the passage defines the theological meaning and nature of the trumpet plagues in the light of the petition of the slain saints for justice in the scene of the fifth seal (6:9-11). The strong verbal and thematic parallels between the scene of the fifth seal (6:9-11) and 8:3-5, as well as the introductory function of 8:3-5 to the seven-trumpet series suggest what seems to be the main theme of the entire Apocalypse: the situation of faithful Christians in the hostile world. The purpose of the passage in view was, on one hand, to provide the faithful, suffering under the oppression of Rome, as well as the Christians throughout the centuries, with an assurance that their suffering is not the last word and that heaven is not indifferent to what they pass through. On the other hand, the passage—and the whole book as well—is at the same time a call to the suffering faithful of all ages not for active resistance, but rather for patient endurance (cf. Rev 13:10; 14:12). The last word is with God, and he will bring judgment and retribution on the oppressors of his people.